

Nonprofits & NGOs

Inclusive Board Meetings

Diverse teams get better results, but it takes skill and thoughtfulness to make the most of diverse experience at a board table.

By [Katie Smith Milway](#) & [Susan Wolf Ditkoff](#) | Feb. 19, 2024



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The research is clear: **Diverse teams get better results**. From 2019 to 2021 corporate boards **increased their diversity by 50 percent**, just as many social sector boards have **responded to societal wakeup calls** by recruiting more members who can represent the communities they serve. But once a board becomes more community-anchored, how are they to embrace the challenge of inclusive governance and bring out the best insights from their new members? Here, the issue becomes much less clear.

Through interviews with governance experts, with foundation and nonprofit leaders who have prioritized developing inclusive board meetings, and our own work in philanthropy advising and board service, we've identified four

steps that foundation, board, and sector leaders can follow, breaking down and applying ideas for inclusive governance into concrete questions and tactics.

1. Agree on the Big Why

There is no shortage of strategies for creating successful board meetings. For example, BoardSource's classic ***Governance as Leadership*** reframes the fiduciary, strategic, and leadership roles of a trustee through a lens of generative discussion, and their ***Principles of Purpose-Driven Board Leadership*** speaks to ecosystems, equity, and participant voice. But inclusion that draws out board members' unique backgrounds and knowledge in discussions can be much trickier. "The framework invites you to think in a certain way," as Bill Ryan, a coauthor of *Governance as Leadership* told us, "but the real payoff comes when boards figure out what conditions they need to have in place to enable it."

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In our interviews, we found that leaders who succeeded in the hard work of changing their boardroom culture and growing engagement for all members started with honest conversations, with each board member and senior staff, about *why inclusion matters* and how it reflects the organization's values. They talked about what could get in the way of creating a shared commitment and how to overcome those barriers and work through dissention as counter-insights arose from diverse experience. And they agreed as a group on the benefits of change and risks of inaction. As Lauren Scott put it, executive director of the Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund: "First, we needed to do values work and affirmed that equity, grassroots inclusiveness, and responsiveness were part of our values."

Questions to spur the "big why" conversation:

- How is inclusion of all board members critical to achieving our mission and successful initiatives?
- How do our current agenda and board processes create barriers to participation for some board members?
- How can we overcome those barriers before, during, or after our meetings?
- What risks do our initiatives or organizations face if we fail to include all perspectives in our debates?
- Where would we make better decisions if all voices were heard in board discussions?
- What are unspoken fears that limit the staff's candor with the board?
- How can we create positive atmosphere for staff to share what hasn't worked?
- How can we embrace and move through—rather than fear and avoid—productive dissention?

2. Design Agendas to Create Generative Conversations

Allocating too much of any board meeting to "state-of-the-union" presentations can build walls of jargon between those building the presentations and those who bring community insight. To spark generative conversation for all, separate out the "inform" elements from critical questions. Dispensing with pure information relay through pre-reads and preparatory calls leaves the meeting agenda the necessary time to zero in on animating questions of, say, allocating scarce resources based on changing community conditions, or examining unintended consequences. At least two-thirds of any board meeting should be purposeful discussion that draws on the experience of all members.

At the Ford Foundation, Senior Vice President Hilary Pennington observes that most of their two-day board meetings are designed to create generative interactions rather than stand-and-deliver presentations. Foundation President Darren Walker views Ford's trustees as partners, and he speaks to each trustee ahead of every board meeting to preview agenda items and discuss questions to advance collective wisdom. In the meeting itself, Ford has three kinds of sessions devoted to its programs: committee discussions with staff and grantees, which are highly interactive (the board is divided into two program committees), lunch sessions on big topics like global governance and finance reform (with provocative speakers who take substantive questions from the trustees), and program sessions with the full board, attended by all program directors, dealing with cross-cutting themes (such as how Ford measures impact, its **BUILD program**, **Ford Global Fellows**, or a strategy refresh). For these, staff may present, but they do so in the shoes of a learner, asking how their presentation will help the board think, and how it will elicit board questions that help staff think.

Similarly, at after-school enrichment nonprofit Boston Scores (where coauthor Milway serves as a board director), bringing parents and public school staff onto the board led to completely overhauling board agendas to move much of housekeeping to pre-meeting committee work, and to build full-board meetings around learning discussions rooted in community needs and responsiveness (for example the impact on kids, families and teachers of a school district phasing out middle schools, and implications for after-school programming).

Questions to keep board meetings generative:

- What are board members seeing that we as an organization don't yet know?
- How do trustees perceive local, regional, or world events changing the context for our work?
- What is our north star, the values and approaches that shouldn't change, when all else does?

3. Build Board Members' Financial Expertise

A board's fiduciary responsibility is non-negotiable, and building generative board conversations doesn't mean skipping reviews of investments, budgets, and funding for initiatives. But creating inclusive conversations does call for extra effort to elicit participation of all board members in how grants or programs have fostered change, and how they could create deeper, stronger change going forward. Indeed, such reviews can lead to breakthrough ideas. At Ford, for example, what started as "fiduciary" discussions have given rise to creative funding mechanisms like Ford's COVID-era **social justice bond**, an initiative to commit \$1 billion of the foundation's endowment to impact investing.

This component of a meeting can too often get lost in thickets of financial information and evaluation data. Transforming fiduciary oversight into generative discussion calls for building all board members' financial acumen, but *also* creating safe spaces for learning. At World Vision U.S. (WVUS), for example, board members rotate through the Finance and Audit Committee in their first year to get a grasp on the committee's function and to build familiarity with the critical questions it stewards. At both WVUS and American Jewish World Service (AJWS), a staff liaison to the board serves as a help line for trustee questions, including those related to financial pre-reads, providing an informational channel to steer individual board experience to optimal meeting questions.

Appointing a staff liaison was transformational for AJWS. When CEO Robert Bank first attended AJWS board meetings, then an executive vice president, "Budget and finance presentations took the form of a well-rehearsed presentation from staff members with little space for generative conversation," he recalls. It was a recipe for shutting down participation from non-finance types in the room. Today, AJWS has a full-time Board Liaison who has transformed this dynamic. "One of the best things that happened," Bank told us, "is that our Board Liaison enhanced constructive partnership. This person partners with our Chief of Staff to create an inclusive board culture of participation and meaning, and works with board members in every capacity of governance." The Liaison manages every piece of board relationships, setting a cadence of meetings, ensuring committees are populated, and that AJWS's governance complies with bylaws. And they make sure agendas have plenty space for generative conversation. "Our Board Liaison and I share the partnership with the board leadership," said Bank.

Tactics to build boards' financial expertise:

- Appoint a board liaison as help line for individual members to ask questions and learn in a quiet, individualized, judgment-free zone.
- Circulate financial information well in advance of board meetings with 1:1 interpretation calls between each trustee and appropriate staff or board liaison.
- Ask new board members to rotate through a seat on the finance committee in their first year to understand the workings of budget and investments. (It goes without saying that fiduciary board onboarding, customized to each trustee's specific background, is a crucial first step.)
- Focus budget discussions on where the biggest risks and opportunities lie in living into any proposed budget, and report on those risks over time.
- Focus evaluation discussions on why results of a given initiative or investment is off track or surpassing expectations.

4. Bring Views of Those You Seek to Help Into All Strategy Discussions

Fiduciary responsibility calls for looking back and learning, but a board's strategic responsibility is also to look forward, anticipating resource and programmatic needs and ideating ways to address them. Every board member will be concerned for the needs of those whom the organization seeks to help, especially members with direct experience of those needs. Thus, informing every meeting with directly communicated views of program participants can anchor inclusive discussion, be it a lunch speaker, video testimony, survey findings to paint a data-driven picture, or stories from program staff working directly with participants.

Successfully embedding participant voice into meetings also calls for anticipating where a board member's community knowledge will be valuable, and the skills and life experience each can contribute to asking questions of participants. Pre-calls with board members should probe this.

Leaders like Tracy Sawicki of Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation, whose priorities include helping individuals with disabilities, regularly bring grantee voices into the board room through what they call "community consultants," young people, 18 to 26, living with the issues Tower funds. The consultants work side by side with Tower's program officers to review and make decisions on programs and services grants. "The community grant consultants' input has changed the discussion on some of the grants and in a few cases the decision to recommend funding," as Sawicki put it. The Tower Foundation also brings grantee voice to board meetings via its Community Expert Fund. An independent team of young people with lived experience have \$200,000 annually for grantmaking. They determine the Fund's focus, review proposals, make final grant award decisions and report them to the board. In Sawicki's words: "Participatory grantmaking is changing how we work. Young people are at our table giving insights and making decisions that impact our grantmaking. It is also creating a pipeline for future Board membership."

Tactics for anchoring strategy discussion in participant voice:

- Bring views of those you seek to help into every board meeting to connect members directly to the work, through voting or nonvoting community liaisons, lunch speakers or video testimonies, feedback surveys, or program officer

stories.

- Establish and stipend an advisory council of participants and give them a real voice in grantmaking/programmatic recommendations and processes, since financial hardship is a well-established barrier to volunteer service.

It Starts With Onboarding

Leaders who are serious about inclusive boardroom discussions can take these steps to transform board culture and participation in discussions. Each step has its start in the onboarding process for new members. Some boards, like WVUS, have new board members stay an extra day to meet staff who take them through core documents that capture values statements, guiding principles, financials, and strategic processes. Others, like AJWS, have board liaisons, while others like Boston Scores assign new members a “board buddy,” a longer-tenured member who can help demystify board agendas ahead of meetings and debrief afterwards over the first six months or so of service.

Whatever your approach, pay special attention to every board member’s first year at the table, be transparent about the learning journey, and ask them for feedback in specific and frequent ways—all of which affirm why they are there and what they can contribute most valuably.

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